



The Augur

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THE TOPSY TURVY WORLD OF JUDAEAN NUMISMATICS

by Mel Wacks NLG

David Hendin has recently proposed in articles in the *Numismatic Review* and *The Shekel* that the pomegranate plant on the reverse of the famous Jewish Shekels and Half Shekels (66-70 A.D.) should be looked at upside down to its portrayal in the past . . . so that it would be "in its natural position."



OR?



Indeed, it is always refreshing to have an old accepted theory challenged; I have done it many times in past articles. However, in this instance I must question Hendin's new hypothesis. He asks, "Why would an ancient designer or engraver depict three heavy, ripe fruits springing upright from their stems when in nature the pomegranates hang only at downward angles." The simple answer is that it was not intended to depict ripe fruits, but rather the budding flowers of the pomegranate. Ripe pomegranate fruits are depicted realistically on other Jewish coins that predate the Shekels. A tiny pomegranate was shown between two cornucopias on some of the small Hasmonean bronze "mites" (c. 135-40 B.C.), and a plump pomegranate is found on a rare bronze of Herod the Great (37 B.C.). In both of these instances, the rounded fruit has a small "crown." On the other hand, the objects on the Shekel have small bodies and large tri-pointed crowns.



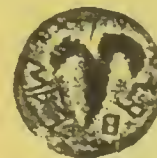
Pomegranates on Hasmonean "mite" (left) and Herod the Great bronze (right).

I had the pleasure of observing similar pomegranate buds in my own backyard last summer . . . and can report that they are accurately depicted on the ancient Jewish Shekels. Shown is a stylized portrayal of three pomegranate buds just beginning to flower.

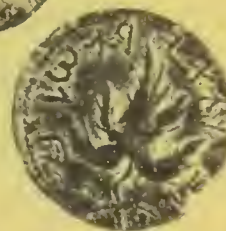
Hendin goes on to write that "when other botanical items were depicted at this time on coins they were always shown hanging as they do in nature. These include the vine leaf on tendril, depicted on prutot of the Jewish War (First Revolt), as well as bunches of grapes on vines and more vine leaves appearing on coins of the Bar Kochba War (Second Revolt)." Actually, the numismatic evidence tends to contradict Hendin's view of what is "natural."



OR?



OR?



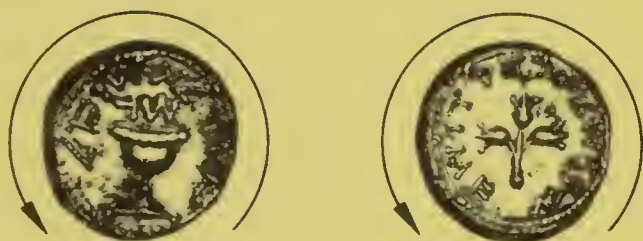
Indeed, all of the standard reference books (including my own) show botanical objects on Jewish coins in the same manner . . . but it is more likely that we have just become accustomed to these positions rather than their being "natural." As a step towards correcting this custom, I note that the recent auction catalogs of Frank Sternberg, Zurich, depict the

vine leaf on the coins of Bar Kochba 180 degrees out of phase (e.g. upside down) from the previously accepted position, while showing the vine leaf on the First Revolt prutah in the old position. So what is “natural”? Numerous ancient Greek coins depict leaves pointing upwards! Let us examine the numismatic evidence in greater detail.



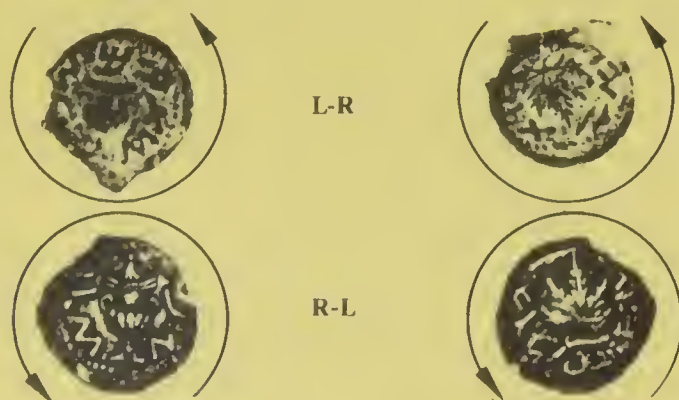
Ancient Greek coin (left) and modern Canadian gold coin (right) with leaves pointed upward.

The silver Shekels, first struck A.D. 66/67, were the first coins of Judaea to have Hebrew inscriptions on both sides (aside from the extremely rare tiny “Yehud” coins). The natural position of the chalice is obvious, and its inscription “Shekel of Israel” starts at 4 o’clock and reads counterclockwise to 8 o’clock (I’ll call this the R-L layout). Assuming consistency between the inscription layout of the obverse and reverse, this would “force” the plant to be upright.



Arrows indicate the way the ancient Hebrew inscriptions are read (R-L) on the Jewish Shekels.

On the other hand, the bronze prutah first issued in the second year of the Revolt (A.D. 67/68) reads from 10 o’clock counterclockwise to 12 o’clock around the chalice (I’ll call this the L-R layout). To obtain a consistent reading from the reverse, the leaf would have to be facing with the tip down. But then in the following year, the obverse inscription was changed to the R-L layout (thus corresponding to the Shekels), and if it was then assumed that the reverse legend should also be read R-L, this would place the vine leaf upside down, that is pointing upwards! I believe this is the way it was intended.



First Revolt bronze prutot: Year Two (upper) and Year Three (lower).

In the fourth year of the revolt, three new bronze coin types were introduced, probably due to the shortage of silver. These were hard times for the Jewish revolutionaries, as the crude layouts (with uneven spacing) of the legends confirm. The two larger pieces have dual legends on the obverse, consisting of the date and denomination (“quarter” and “half”); the layout is not quite R-L or L-R. However, the reverses of all three bronzes as well as the obverse of the smallest all have a straightforward R-L layout for the inscription. There can be no question about the “natural” position of the objects – lulav, ethrog, palm tree, chalice – depicted, though the single ethrog on the reverse of the “quarter” is ambiguous.

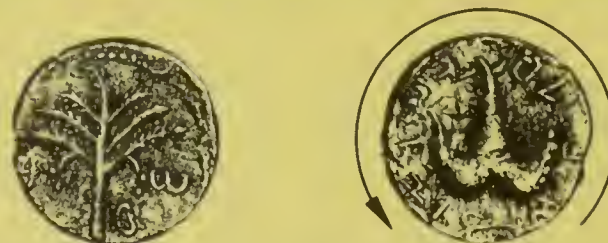
The next occasion for Hebrew inscriptions on both sides was on the coins of the Second Revolt (A.D. 132-135). Where the upright positions of objects are certain (e.g. Temple, chalice, lyre), the legends are all R-L. Applying this R-L pattern to the botanical motifs one finds an upright lulav, upright palm branch . . . but upside down vine leaves and upside down bunches of grapes! Again, this appears to be the way it was intended, regardless of the depiction in the standard reference works.



Second Revolt tetradrachm showing R-L layout of inscriptions.



Second Revolt denarius with R-L layout forces grapes to be upside down!



Second Revolt bronze with R-L layout forces vine leaf to have the pointed end up!

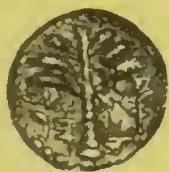
The final piece of evidence is the striking “axis” . . . that is, the relative position of obverse to reverse design when the coin is rotated around its vertical axis. Do this with most any medal and both sides are upright . . . we will show this as ↑; for any U.S. coin the reverse is upside down . . . shown as ↓. When an ancient Jewish Shekel is rotated in this manner its axis is ↑ assuming the pomegranate is upright and the inscriptions are read R-L. Kadman (“Coins of the Jewish Wars”) writes that “the position of the (Shekel) axis shows considerable exactitude.” And this consistency holds for the Half Shekel as well.

Kadman also assumes that the vine leaf on the First Revolt prutah is pointed downward . . . but he then goes on to indicate that almost all of these prutot have ↓ axes. Isn't it more logical to assume that the position of the vine leaf should be reversed so that the prutah axis matches the ↑ axis of all other First Revolt issues? Similarly, virtually all Bar Kochba coins have a ↑ axis, except those with a vine leaf or bunch of grapes are indicated as ↓ in catalogs (where they are shown in the generally accepted upright position). However, if it is assumed that the vine leaf and bunch of grapes were originally depicted upside down (e.g. pointed up), then all of these coins would have ↑ axes as the other unambiguous coins issued at the same time at the same mint. Q.E.D.

My conclusions are exactly the opposite of those expressed by David Hendin. Based on the full numismatic evidence — including consistency of the layouts of the Hebrew legends and the striking axis — the pomegranate buds on the Shekels have been depicted properly over the centuries (rightside up), but the vine leaves and bunches of grapes on the coins of the First and Second Revolts should actually be turned upside down (pointed upwards)!

I appreciate Hendin having brought up this interesting and previously ignored subject. I am sure that others will want to get their two cents (two prutot?) in before the subject is exhausted, and I look forward to all comments.

COIN OF THE MONTH



This bronze features the name of "Eleazar the Priest" around the palm tree. It was struck in the first year of the Second Revolt (132/133 AD). No coins of Eleazar were issued after the first year. After reading the preceding article, you decide how to view the bunch of grapes. . . the "normal?" way or the "right?" way.

RELIGIOUS CHARACTER OF ANCIENT COINS

by Professor J. Zimmerman
Part III

The religious character of ancient coins was not confined to Greece and Rome, but we have an illustration from Kanishka, who reigned in North-western India during the second century, and whose coinage reflects his religious ideas and changes of faith. His coins are stamped with the effigies of the gods worshipped by the Greeks, Persians, and Indians, some of them even bearing the image of Buddha Sakakyamuni with the name in Greek. This is rather incongruous and shows a strange evolution of belief in Buddha to find him in the company of deities, especially in his native country, where he not only disclaimed all pretension to deity for himself, but recognized the existence of no god in his system of teaching. Here then, by a strange irony of history, he is enthroned on the coinage as on a parity with the ancient gods, and even usurping the place of Siva.



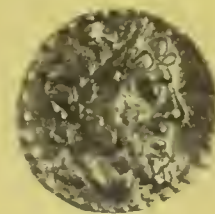
Indo-Greek gold stater of Kanishka (120-150 AD). King is depicted on obverse, solar deity on reverse.

His successor Huvishka continued the practice, with the exception that he omitted Buddha from his medallion pantheon, and which would seem to indicate that he had no great faith in the atheistic reformer, for he placed on his coins the effigies of a heterogeneous variety of deities, including Herakles, Serapis, the fire-god Pharro, and others of Indian origin. A radical change of religious sentiment is apparent in his successor Vasudeva, who seems to have kept himself free from all Hellenic influences, for the figure of the Indian god Siva appears on nearly all his coins. I should have stated that the Kushan Kadphises II, after his conquest of North-western India, became a convert to their religion, for he always placed the image of the god Siva upon his coins.

The coins from the earliest days of Christianity are our best original sources of knowledge regarding the prevalence of Hellenistic culture and worship in Palestine, and they constitute an authentic historic picture, that has come down to us without revision, of the faith of their time. On the coins of Ascalon we have represented Aphrodite, who is identical with Astarte, as the tutelary goddess of the place. Besides we have many Greek deities — Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo, Helios, Athene, etc. On those of Raphia who are distinguished with supremacy are Apollo and Artemis; while on the coins of Ptolemais we see Zeus, Artemis, Persephone, Perseus, the Egyptian Serapis, and the Phrygian Cybele. On the coins of Gadara we have depicted Zeus, Herakles and Astarte, and these full of sad suggestion — Jesus must have seen on the occasion when that misguided people besought Him to leave their coast.



Aphrodite on coin of Ascalon (85/86 AD).



Zeus on coin of Ptolemais (44/43 BC).



Zeus in Temple on coin of Gadara (214/215 AD).



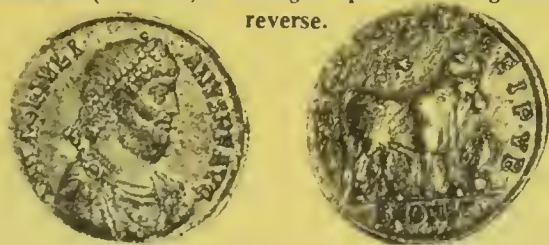
Poseidon on coin of Ascalon (151/152 AD).

These numerous coins of their cities stamped with the images of their local cult, and the many Roman coins that bore the effigies of gods and goddesses, are monumental as well as numismatic contemporary witnesses to the truth that "the world through its wisdom knew not God."

This historic background from the contemporary numismatic monuments of the ancients gives vivid realism to the religious forces then existing and with which at times Christianity had to contend. It also sheds light upon the realistic interpretation of the words of the Apostle when writing to the struggling Church at Corinth: "There is no God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or on earth: as there are gods many, and lords many, yet to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we unto Him, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we through Him." It must have been a great joy to the Christian Church, when, after the accession of Constantine the Great, they saw the labarum and symbols of Christ appear occasionally on the imperial coinage, but their hearts must have sunk again when, later, his nephew Julian the Philosopher, in his zeal to restore paganism, supplanted the Christian symbols with pagan devices, and placed on the money the figure of Apis, Serapis, Isis, Osiris, and others, banishing every suggestion of the cross and of that religion so dear to the struggling Church. And how suddenly that sorrow was turned into joy, for with the death of Julian, Jovianus ascended the throne, and the images of the Egyptian deities disappeared, and the symbols of Christ appeared again on the coinage of Rome. I do not mean to convey the impression that in the instances named the cross appeared on all, but rather on a few, types, and yet that was an acknowledgment of Christ on the coins of the empire, even though it was not always authorized by the emperor.



Coin of Vetricius (350 AD) showing Emperor holding Christogram on reverse.



Coin of Julian the Apostle (360-363 AD).

The change was natural, for among the ancient Romans the universal religious sentiment found expression in their national life, as well as entered into the daily affairs of their domestic and social relations, for no household was without its tutelary divinities, but it worshipped as its guardian spirits the Lares and the Penates. The state observed the forms of religion most scrupulously, and under the empire the emperor became the Pontifex Maximus, or head of the Pontificate, and the insignia of four priestly colleges appear on certain coins of Antoninus Pius.

In referring to the cross on these coins as a symbol of Christianity, I am reminded that some have thought to discredit our faith and reverence for the historic character of this hallowed symbol of our holy religion by informing us that the symbol of the cross had been borrowed from paganism, and "had been used long before Jesus was born," and that the Christian traditions associated with it in the modern mind are pagan in

origin. But there is nothing in such reasoning to detract from the Christian significance of the cross, even though some ancient coins may have borne a geometrical form of it, or that thousands of human beings had been crucified upon the cross long before the advent of Christianity, or that there is nothing new in its form — all true enough, for the Southern Cross is as old as Creation.



Crux Ansata on silver stater of Salamis, Cyprus (5th Century BC).



Christogram on coin of Constantius II (353 AD).

To be continued

The exchange rate of the Palestinian city coins in the light of Rabbinic sources and the problem of the Hezi and Revia of the Jewish War.

Arie Kindler, Israel



"Revia"



"Hezi"

In the Mishna, Kedushin I, 1 and Eduyoth IV, 7, Jerusalem Talmud, Kedushin 58d and Babylonian Talmud, Kedushin 12a the money system obtaining in Palestine during the period A.D. 50-250 is explained, showing inter alia that 24 issarim (asses) were equal to 1 sus (denarius). This system reveals to us the stability of the silver standard and the fact that the ratio of the Roman imperial money to the Palestinian was 2:3 in favour of the Roman. A fact of great importance for the understanding of the economic situation in the Roman provinces.

The bronze denominations of Hezi (= half) and Revia (= quarter), which were hitherto interpreted as emergency money with 'Hezi' standing for a half silver Shekel and 'Revia' for a quarter silver Shekel, can now be recognized as half and quarter sestertii, i.e. dupondii, and asses. This argumentation is based on the weights and sizes of these coins as well as on the monetary policy of the Jewish authorities in the fourth year of the War (A.D. 69/70) in view of the high prices for foodstuffs in the city as well as of the shortage of man power and of metal in the mint of the besieged Jerusalem.

Editors Note: The above is an abstract of an important paper prepared by Arie Kindler, Curator of the Kadman Numismatic Museum, Tel Aviv. Thanks to BNS member Dr. Martin Rizack for obtaining this article.